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Abstract

Because of Lewis's typological approach to his use of sources, it is possible to see Aslan not just as a straight allegory of Christ but as embodying elements from other mythic systems; in this case, Balder, a figure from Norse mythology. This is supported by Lewis's known love for northern myths and his particular reaction to the lines about Balder from Longfellow's "Tegnér's Drapa."

Additional Keywords

Balder; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Aslan; Norse mythology

Balder the Beautiful: Aslan's Norse Ancestor in *The Chronicles of Narnia*

Salwa Khoddam

MOST critics of *The Chronicles of Narnia* view Aslan, the great lion, as a Christ-figure. But this charismatic lion has also been linked to literary ancestors as well: lions from medieval bestiaries, Blake's tiger, T. S. Eliot's tiger in "Gerontion" (Brady 3), Charles Williams's archetypal lion in *The Place of the Lion* (Lindskoog 53), and Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven (Lindskoog 63). Chad Walsh, however, sees Aslan as a vegetation god (142). Following up on Walsh's thesis, I would like to suggest that Aslan has one more ancestor in the offing: Balder, the son of Odin and Frigga, supreme god and goddess of Scandinavia, who in some traditions was also considered a grain god.

The typological mind of Lewis, which viewed all myths as shadows of the Christian historical "myth," reached back into pre-Christian times for sources to create his fictive worlds—specifically to Norse mythology, which, more than any other mythology, fulfilled his artistic and spiritual needs. Norse mythology had an early and long-lasting effect on Lewis. Indeed, Norse mythology and Christianity united in his literary imagination. This triad provided all his fiction with a visionary dimension that determined his unique settings, plots, and characters. One may argue that in *The Chronicles*, which are the focus of this paper, Norse mythology, specifically the myth of Balder, provided Lewis not only with a mystical, sacred landscape, but also with a Nordic type of the Dying God, essentially a type of Christ, as an analogue to Aslan. Lewis employs the Northern setting and the Balder-analogues to further distance his setting, plot, and main character (already distanced in that Aslan is a beast and Narnia another world) from the New Testament Christ, thus freeing Aslan to be a fully active protagonist in his own narrative: creator, redeemer, guide, and destroyer of his own world. With the use of Norse mythology, Lewis avoids parochializing Christianity and instead enriches it with vast vistas of time and space.

This typological thinking appears to have been central to Lewis's view of mythology. It provided him with an analogic view of history, the center of

which is Christ. Like the early church fathers who had interpreted events from the Old Testament and pagan myths as shadows of those from the New Testament, Lewis saw all pre-Christian myths as shadows of the Christian truth. Consequently, he believed that a good pagan can provide some images about reality, not only significant but in fact more relevant than those of some systematic theologians. In "Religion Without Dogma?" Lewis reveals this typological cast of mind when he writes,

these stories [of pagan myths] may well be a *preparatio evangelica*, a divine hinting in poetic and ritual form at the same central truth which was later focussed and (so to speak) historicized in the Incarnation. To me who approached Christianity from a delighted interest in, and reverence for, the best pagan imagination, who loved Balder before Christ and Plato before St. Augustine, the anthropological argument against Christianity has never been formidable. (*God in the Dock* 132)

This typological approach thus transformed Balder into a Nordic type of Christ for Lewis just as Orpheus had been regarded as a Greek type by the early Christian fathers (e.g. Clement of Alexandria).

The myth of Balder was highly instrumental in igniting Lewis's lifetime love affair with Norse mythology. At the impressionable age of eight or so, when (as he admits) he lived largely in his imagination, he happened across a poem by Longfellow, titled "Tegnér's Drapa" ("Tegnér's Death Song"), an elegy by Longfellow on the death of the Swedish Bishop-poet Tegnér in 1846. Nancy-Lou Patterson has discussed this poem in her article (9-11). In this dirge, Longfellow compared Tegnér to Balder. The poem begins with these haunting lines:

I heard a voice, that cried,
"Balder the Beautiful
Is dead, is dead!"
And through the misty air
Passed like the mournful cry
Of sunward sailing cranes. (111)

After narrating the story of Balder's death at the hands of Loki (a handsome but evil Norse god), Longfellow ends with an invocation to the Norse bards to preserve of the old days "The freedom only, / Not the deeds of blood!" (111-12). The poem had a hypnotic effect on Lewis, intensified by his mistaken

belief that it was a translation by Longfellow of an original Norse poem by Tegnér. Lewis describes his reaction to the poem: "I knew nothing about Balder, but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote)" (*Surprised by Joy* 17).

Later, between 1911-13, while at Cherbourg House (which Lewis named "Chartres" in *Surprised by Joy*), he experienced another "personal Renaissance" associated with Norse mythology when he came across Arthur Rackham's illustrations to *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*. He writes, "Pure 'Northernness' engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity" (*Surprised* 73). The memory of joy experienced earlier when reading Longfellow's poem came back to him, flooding his imagination with images of Siegfried and Balder and the sunward sailing cranes. Nothing could shake off this craze for Northernness, which he later shared with Arthur Greeves, Charles Williams, and J. R. R. Tolkien.

From his early study of Wagner, he then moved on to read *Mallet's Northern Antiquities* (1847), H. A. Guerber's *Myths of the Norsemen* (1908), and *Myths and Legends of the Teutonic Race*. He later felt confident enough of his knowledge of Norse mythology to compose a Euripidean drama titled *Loki Bound*, about the conflict between Loki and other gods. In 1914 he asked Arthur Greeves if he would set it to music but, fortunately, the project was soon abandoned (*Surprised* 114-115; *They Stand Together* 50-53). In February 1927, Lewis began to tackle Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* in the original and felt somewhat successful at that (Carpenter 28). His eventual goal was to read the *Poetic Edda* also in the original. At that time he also belonged to the Icelandic Society, among several others (*Stand* 317). So, when Lewis wrote, "I knew my way about the Eddaic cosmos, could locate each of the roots of the Ash and knew who ran up and down it" (*Surprised* 165), he was writing with accuracy.

It is no surprise then to find that a presence of the numinous North thus pervades his entire fiction, especially the Narnia stories, and in some more than others. The Narnian landscape is best described by Lewis in these haunting lines about the "real" Narnia: "Every rock and flower and blade of grass looks as if it meant more. I can't describe it better than that" (*The Last Battle* 213). Like a Northern landscape, the Narnian landscape—especially in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, *The Magician's Nephew*, and *The Last Battle*—also contains

scenes of martial courage and bravery, of swords and battles and magic, peopled with few humans, and unusual mythical characters: stone giants and animals, a beautiful witch on a sledge, brave medieval Narnians sailing on a ship, dwarfs, dryads, serpents, unicorns, centaurs, and talking animals. Like the Norse landscape where Odin is at loggerheads with Thor (the fierce god of thunder), Narnia's landscape is also the stark, remote, landscape where good forces fight evil ones (e.g. Aslan, the Narnians, and their followers versus Tashlan, the Calormenes, and their followers.) Nature takes on a primeval Northern sacredness in Narnia. Although these heroic martial struggles in the Norse myths were resolved by an affirmation of justice, vengeance still reared its head generations after. In Narnia, however, these cyclical tragedies are subsumed by hope and cheerfulness due to Aslan, the Christ-figure and savior (Walsh 156).

This mystic and rich Norse pagan setting also offered Lewis a Christ-figure and a specific myth to use in his Narnian universe: the myth of the Dying God, of which Balder was considered a type also. Lewis's most significant statements on this particular myth, which reveal his typological thinking as discussed earlier, is found in his essay "Myth Became Fact," where he writes: "The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. [. . .] We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical person crucified" (*God in the Dock* 66-67).

In *Reflections on the Psalms* Lewis also refers to these myths of the Dying God as the most important myths for him because they tell "that man must undergo some sort of death if he would truly live. [. . .] The resemblance between these myths and the Christian truth is no more accidental than the sun and the sun's reflection in a pond" (107). His strongest statements on this matter are found in chapter three of *Miracles*, where he argues that the Dying God or Corn-King is a "portrait" of Christ (139), although any natural similarity between the two, among other elements of Natural-religion, has been suppressed in Judaism and Christianity. The typological thinking that links Balder to Christ is obvious in both of these statements.

I think that although the mature Lewis, and Longfellow before him, accepted these pagan myths, specifically the Balder myth, for aesthetic, literary, and theological reasons, they, like the early Teutonic Christians, were already looking past them over the horizon to the new myth which would focus on the law of love rather than the law of force. Perhaps this affinity with Longfellow is

the reason why Longfellow's "Tegnér's Drapa" continued to affect Lewis so deeply. The ending of the poem seems to speak for the mature Lewis:

The law of force is dead!
The law of love prevails
Thor, the thunder
Shall rule the earth no more
No more, with threats,
Challenge the meek Christ. (112)

For Longfellow in 1846, Balder had already melted into Christ, a fusion that would happen for Lewis in 1929 with his conversion. While the analogues between Aslan and Christ have been extensively covered by Lewis's critics, those between Aslan and Balder as types of the Dying God have not. To study these latter analogues, let me present the essential elements of the myth of the Dying God and briefly compare them in the Balder and Aslan myths. The essentials of this myth are the following: 1) a beautiful young man/ god/ hero loved by a goddess, 2) his death from a bloody wound, 3) a descent or stay in the underworld, 4) mourning and tears at his loss, and 5) his return (Davidson 150, 154). These elements, which are present in the Christian story, are also present with some variations in the myths of Balder and Aslan.

After delving into obscure, puzzling, and often inconsistent fragments that constitute the *Eddas* and Saxo Grammaticus's *History of the Danes*, scholars of Norse mythology, I am certain, would agree with Davidson's conclusion that "the story of Balder is perhaps the most tantalizing of all the puzzling myths which have survived in the north" (189). However, in the "Gylfaginning" in Snorri's *Prose Edda*, the tragic story of Balder is presented in a coherent form. Balder is described in the following passage:

[T]here is good to be told of him. He is best and all praise him. He is so fair in appearance and so bright that light shines from him, and there is a plant so white that it is called after Balder's eyelash. It is the whitest of all plants, and from this you can tell his beauty both of hair and body. He is the wisest of the Aesir [the gods] and most beautifully spoken and most merciful. [. . .] He lives in a place called Breidablik. This is in Heaven. No unclean thing is permitted to be there. (23)

This original skeletal description was later embellished with interpolations by Christian copyists, linking Odin to God and thus Balder to Christ. Odin becomes not only the creator of heaven and earth, but also the "All-Father,"

“who liveth from all ages,” “the Supreme Being, endowing man with a soul” “which shall live and never perish” (Blackwell 482). According to Branstons, the name Balder comes from an Old Germanic word *bealdor* meaning “Lord” (149). To Davidson, *baldaeg* means “bright day” (183). Balder is also equivalent to Apollo, as a sun-being, animating spirits, warming the imagination, and thus inspiring poetry (Blackwell 511-12).

Many of these attributes apply to Aslan. In his primeval simplicity he parallels Balder the Good. Like Balder, Aslan comes from a royal and divine lineage and is much beloved by all the good creatures of Narnia and the children. He is the Son of the Emperor over-the-sea, the King above all High Kings in Narnia. He is also a light-bearer like both Balder and Christ. Light flashes every time Aslan appears on the Narnian landscape, even on moonless nights (*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 113). He chases away the darkness that engulfs Caspian’s ship (*Voyage* 201). He appears to Shasta with the sunrise in “fiery brightness” (*The Horse and His Boy* 177-78). After he created Narnia, Aslan, “Huge, shaggy, and bright, stood facing the risen sun. [His] mouth was wide open in song” (*The Magician’s Nephew* 119-20). As a central character in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan, however, is more active than Balder, who functions as a victim of evil in a skeletal plot, but who, in some versions, returns from the dead with the spring, to bring about a beautiful, new world. Like Balder’s home in heaven, Aslan’s Country is an analogue of the Christian Heaven. It is not a specific place, but is all places. When the reader originally encounters Aslan’s Country, it appears to be a single range of green mountains. Over the course of *The Chronicles* the reader and characters discover that it extends in all directions until all places connect together in *The Last Battle*.

The last four essential elements of the myth of the Dying God—death, descent to hell, mourning, and return—can now be discussed and compared as one unit in the two stories. Balder dies at the hands of the aggressive evil spirit, Loki, who is the son of a giant, and father of the wolf, the serpent, and Hell. Snorri relates Balder’s tragic death. When Balder began having dreams that his life was in danger, his mother requested every god, every creature, every element, metal or plant, to take an oath not to harm him—all except the little parasitic mistletoe which was considered to be too young for such an oath. (In Saxo’s version the mistletoe is replaced by the lowly cabbage.) Loki figures out this magical protection of Balder and tricks Hoder, Balder’s blind brother, into throwing a branch of mistletoe at Balder, which results in Balder’s

death (Davidson 186). Saxo's version, on the other hand, contains a significant variation. It focuses on Balder as a warrior, and in consequence, Balder is slain with a weapon more suited to a martial context—a special sword which his treacherous brother obtained from hell. According to Davidson, there is a sword called “mistletoe” in Norse heroic tradition (187). Balder's funeral pageant and his pyre on a ship are also described by Snorri. It is attended by all the Aesir (49). After grieving over his death, Frigga sends Hermod (another brother of Balder) to Hell to ransom him. Hell agrees only if all things in the world, alive or dead, would weep for Balder. All did so except for a giantess (in some versions an old hag) who could only weep dry tears. It is thought that this giantess was Loki in disguise (50-51). But Snorri does add, after describing the gory punishment of Loki, that Balder, accompanied by all the gods, will return from the dead after Ragnarök (the Norse End of the World) to live in an Elysian-like place (52). According to Mallet and James Frazer, Balder is killed on 21 June at the summer solstice (505; 677); his return occurs during the spring. The “Völuspá” of the *Elder Edda* confirms this rebirth: “Barren fields will bear again, / Balder's return brings an end to sorrow” (7). Balder's death and return brings about a world without the threats of violence. According to David Berkeley, “The new world of Balder is to be beautiful: the dwellings will be roofed with gold, and unsown fields will bear ripened fruit” (86). In this respect, he is the Corn-King or the Dying God. The tradition of Balder's return was so well entrenched in Norse mythology that it endured even after “later Norse poets were determined to kill off the old gods in the new account of Doom” (Branston 156). I believe it endured because it foreshadowed for early Christians the Christian story of salvation.

The most important analogue between Balder and Aslan is their sacrifice at the hands of an evil force. Aslan, the Christ of Narnia, like Balder, embodies goodness sacrificed by evil forces. But his sacrifice, which occurs in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is self-willed, while Balder's is accidental. Although Aslan did not die for all humankind like Christ, he chose to die for one person—Edmund. Aslan dies at the hands of the White Witch, an attractive evil being like Loki. In general, the circumstances of his sacrifice are closer to those of the Saxo Grammaticus version of the Balder myth than the Snorri one because Lewis emphasizes the martial and heroic strains of the story. After Aslan is shaved, muzzled, and tied up, he is slain on the Stone Table by a special weapon, the Stone Knife of the Witch. The readers and witnesses are spared the

gruesomeness of the actual slaying as in the Balder story. However, there is no descent into hell for Aslan. His resurrection occurs at sunrise the next morning. Lucy and Susan, who have spent the night mourning their beloved lion, hear a loud noise. The Stone Table had cracked into two pieces and "There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane [. . .] stood Aslan himself" (*Lion* 178). The Witch, for all her knowledge of magic, does not know the Deep Magic of Narnia which ensures that "Death itself would start working backward" (178). After his magnificent resurrection, Aslan infuses nature with life, liberates the stone statues and melts the snow on which the White Witch and her "vile rabble" (177) thrive. In these actions Aslan parallels the Corn-King or the Dying God, like Balder. Walsh draws a similar conclusion about Aslan. He writes that Aslan is the "vegetation god. [. . . W]here He stands, there is abounding life, not just of the spirit but also of the very earth with its teeming manifestations of vitality" (142). An old rhyme about Aslan recited by Mr. Beaver contains similar conclusions:

Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again. (*Lion* 85)

While Aslan's sacrifice and resurrection are certainly replete with Christian symbolism, the great struggle between the White Witch and her followers on one side and Aslan and his party on the other, as well as the weapon used in Aslan's sacrifice, are reminiscent of the battles between the Norse Aesir in the Eddaic cosmos. The account of Aslan's sacrifice clearly includes Christian and pagan Norse motifs.

The myth of Balder provided Lewis with rich materials for his *Chronicles*: a heroic setting and a Norse Dying God myth to attach to Aslan which would allow his lion, while remaining a lion, nonetheless to be a protagonist in a romance-like and spiritual narrative. Aslan is Christ, the Christ of Narnia, but at a remove from the New Testament Christ. Lewis very skillfully keeps the role of Aslan as Christ but enriches him and his landscape with Norse mythology to engage his readers into a compelling journey of the soul over a timeless and spaceless landscape: Christian, pagan, and fictional. An atmosphere of sacredness pervades this adventure and unifies paganism with Christianity as two stages of

the progress of the soul—a subject of any great story, and certainly of Lewis's great personal story.

In our imaginations as readers, Balder, Aslan, and Christ, all slain and risen, meet in Aslan's Country, simultaneously Jerusalem, the pagan North, and a fictional place. In the presence of these beings, statues come alive and animals and trees begin to speak. And for us who are witnesses, nothing will ever look or be the same again.

Notes

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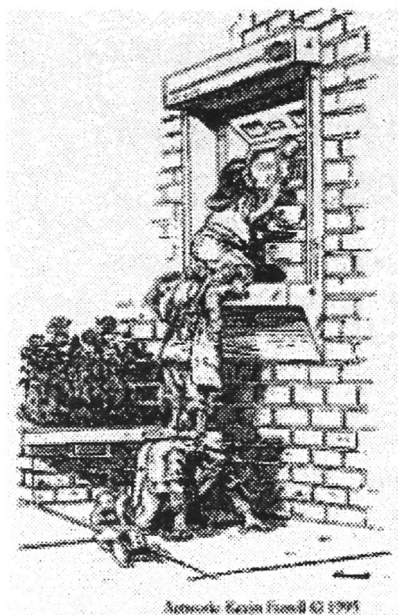
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